

09. Surviving as an Avant-Gardist : A Piratical Study on Kudo Tetsumi

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In the last ten years, several retrospective exhibitions of Kudō Tetsumi (1935–90) have been organized at major museums and galleries in Europe, the United States, and Japan. In these exhibitions, Kudō is often represented as an indispensable artist in contemporary art history who fills a missing link in the international network of artists and art movements. Although the reasons for representing Kudō—in these exhibitions are seen as self-evident in the context of globalization, contradictions are involved in recording an artist into art history who intended to establish himself as an avant-gardist.

“Avant-garde” is a deeply paradoxical notion in art history. While the discipline is founded on the ideal that art transcends historicity, it incorporates art into history in order to construct narratives of styles and isms. Avant-garde artists thereby become heteronomous in modern art history, even though they were in search of an autonomous status. When he or she is Japanese, it becomes more complicated. In Europe, Japanese avant-gardists have been recognized either as “typically Japanese” or “an imitation of Western forerunners,” as Kudō pointed out in 1981. Thus, the possibility of an avant-garde artist of Japanese origin establishing themselves as a vanguard artist is closed off in advance.

In this paper, I explore if Kudō has tried, as the title of his work “The Survival of the Avant-Garde” (1985) suggests, to assert his own position as an avant-gardist. Especially I focus on Kudō’s notion of あなた (you), that is the central figure found in his series of works “あなたの肖像” (Your Portrait). In order to investigate a possible locus of this vanguard artist, I use a “piratical strategy” to intervene in the formation of art history narratives. This is based on Jordy Green’s concept of a “semantic slippage” regarding the definition of “piracy” in the legal cases in the 17th century. Drawing on Derrida’s account of semantic precariousness, vexing sites on the boundaries between different ideologies and views, and the uncertainty of the idea of the boundary as “strategies and relations of force,” Green argues that the definitional instability of piracy can be used tactically in juridical cases. Although this paper does not concern a legal definition, I seek to demonstrate the relationship of her argument to Kudō’s case. Focusing on Kudō’s experimental philosophical writings published in the 1960’s and 1970’s, a time which Kudō had intensive contacts with the Dutch art world, I examine how the artist sought to install himself as a vanguard artist on the unstable borders of concepts and ideologies.